

Anyone Got a Secret?

The final unfrocking of the Pike report in *The Village Voice* last week—after months of damaging disclosures about the CIA—focused fresh attention on the problem of governmental leaks.

In Washington, leaking has long been an institution, a form of public discourse by private means. Within living memory, the custom goes back at least as far as Franklin D. Roosevelt, who regularly held off-the-record chats with the press to get some of his messages across without attribution. It was made sinister by men like Joe McCarthy, who leaked the names of his targets to favored reporters—then made fashionable by the critics of Vietnam and Watergate. By the '70s, in Washington, leaking had grown as common as cocktails. "Everyone is

for him to go. Moynihan feels that a James Reston column in *The New York Times* reporting he was in disfavor with President Ford and Henry Kissinger virtually forced him to resign his United Nations post; Kissinger himself is believed to have inspired the column.

What he objects to, Moynihan told *NEWSWEEK*, is that the press prints leaks "without knowing the reason for them"—though they may stem from a policy struggle within the government. "The press has a problem," he said. "It lets itself be used by anyone with a less than complete sense of honor." But most veteran reporters seem well aware of how the game is played. Says Ronald Ostrow, of *The Los Angeles Times* Washington bureau: "Anyone who's giv-

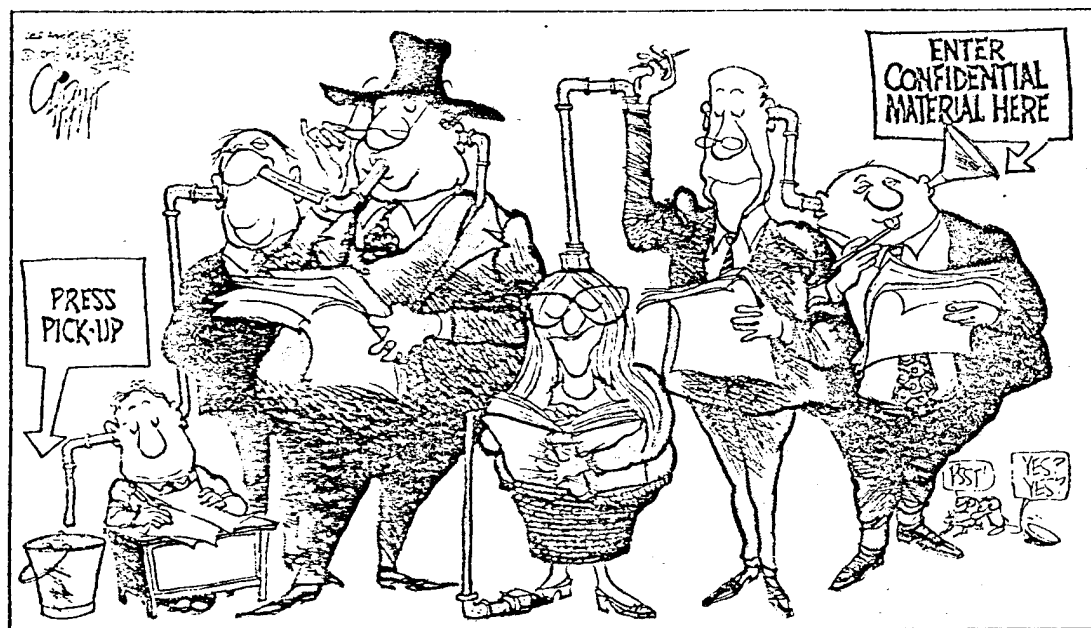
Others argue that the very size and complexity of government have made the leak an imperative part of the process. Seymour Hersh pieced together the story of the My Lai massacre only after a Pentagon official called the pending charges against Lt. William Calley to his attention. By one reliable account, the existence of past CIA assassination plots was first mentioned by President Ford at an off-the-record luncheon with *New York Times* editors, who—bound not to use it themselves—passed the tip to CBS's Daniel Schorr.

Much of what is usually called "leaking," in fact, is really a matter of reporters in possession of fragmentary information digging hard to fill out the details from off-the-record sources. Most are cautious about what may entail serious breaches of national security. But if it seems important enough, they will use it, and they tend to be skeptical about Administration complaints. "Today's critic is tomorrow's leaker," says Michael Gartner, editor of *The Des Moines Register*. "It's all part and parcel of the Washington reporting game."

Danger: Yet, as the leaks multiply, something does appear to have gone out of control. Some reporters of late seem ready to seize anything that smacks of revelation—regardless of its potential for mischief. It has become a possibly dangerous game of finders-keepers, in which no one is quite sure what may be ultimately won or lost, and neither the national nor the public interest is a paramount factor. At the center of the problem lies the loss of trust, exacerbated by the shocks of the past decade, notably Vietnam and Watergate. It is an atmosphere that disturbs not only responsible government leaders but seasoned newsmen as well.

"Washington today is really bent out of shape from top to bottom," observes *The Chicago Daily News's* Peter Lisagor, one of the deans of the Capital's press corps. "It's all part of the Watergate catharsis. We believe no one, we suspect everyone. That goes for the press and it goes for Congress. In some cases you can't make rational judgments because you are operating in an irrational environment." The newer crop of reporters, he adds, "bring a new set of values. They've come in on the Watergate experience. They've seen deceit, the duplicity of the government . . . and they will have none of it." And on balance, neither will most of the press-corps veterans. As journalist Tad Szulc puts it: "Given what's happened in the last ten to fifteen years, I would say the public is probably better served by knowledge than by secrecy."

—DAVID GELMAN with LUCY HOWARD and STEPHAN LESHER in Washington and DEBORAH W. BEERS in New York



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sooner or later involved . . . such disclosure is now part of the way we run our affairs," wrote Daniel P. Moynihan, in a 1971 Commentary article that blamed government officials for leaking and the press for using leaks indiscriminately.

Viewed one way, leaking is an essentially healthy phenomenon of democracy, a stratagem to keep government open and in check. Daniel Ellsberg fed the Pentagon papers to *The New York Times*, he claimed, for what he felt to be a higher moral purpose than his loyalty to the Pentagon—and helped expose the cynical maneuverings of Vietnam policy. John F. Kennedy acknowledged, retroactively, that if the *Times* had not held back—at Kennedy's own request—from revealing the imminence of the Bay of Pigs invasion, that debacle might have been averted. But just as often, the purpose of a leak may be self-serving: the White House lobbying for a program, for example, or signaling an official it is time

ing you information is trying to make a point. You don't just become a Xerox machine and run into print with whatever you get. You have to check it out."

Veto: To George Ball, who served as Under Secretary of State in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, leaks for any reason are inexcusable. Some may come from minor bureaucrats looking for glory, he says. But the most dangerous leakers are officials angling to head off a policy change or pushing policies of their own. Such men "should work within the system to get their views across or get out and speak with freedom. If everybody in government felt free to leak anything they wanted, it would be impossible to administer the government, you'd have chaos." Ball's view is shared by a number of Washington officials. Can the government reach decisions and operate responsibly, they ask, when bureaucrats exercise a kind of veto-by-leak?